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**●The government's move to buy out union membership at GCHQ – Britain's surveillance centre – was sudden and unexpected. Yet behind it is a plan drawn up some two years ago by its former head, Sir Brian Tovey. Frustrated as unions increasingly selected GCHQ as a sensitive target for industrial action, and with American intelligence at his shoulder, he played a double role: the sympathetic manager secretly pressing to end union power.**

ON FEBRUARY 23, 1979, the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham got its first real taste of "industrial action". It was, by most standards, a modest piece of disruption: a few hundred members of two civil service unions; all "fairly low-grade employees", walked out for the day in support of a pay claim. But, for Sir Brian John Maynard Tovey, an expert in 16th-century Italian art, and the head of what was then Britain's most secret and elaborate espionage centre, it was a shocking act – and a watershed.

"That was the turning point for me," Tovey told us last week. "From that time onwards, there was always an undercurrent of worry in some part of the office. It might be the radio operators this week, the communication officers the next, and the computer operators the week after, but there was always something one was trying to contain."

Tovey quickly convinced that trade unionism and the business of espionage were impossible bedfellows. That conviction was not based, he insists, on any objection to the unions' fight for better pay and conditions, nor on any fear that the unions might be the vehicle for left-wing infiltration of GCHQ. Rather: "They began to understand that action at GCHQ was a good way to bring pressure on the government. Here was a problem which was likely to cripple, or severely damage at any time the essence of what I consider to be an important organisation."

So, in 1979, Tovey began a campaign to get the unions banned.

The news that Tovey was, therefore, the original architect of the government's scheme to buy out the right to union membership, at £1,000 a time (£670 after tax), will amaze most of the staff at Cheltenham. Last week, they were convinced that his sudden and, at the age of 58, premature retirement from GCHQ last September must have been caused by his opposition to the plan.

That is because for four years Tovey played an elaborate double game. He shared his belief that the unions were damaging national security with only a handful of intelligence officers, senior civil servants and politicians. As far as GCHQ's unsuspecting union officials were concerned, he remained a courteous and painstaking negotiator, faithfully accessible, and the admirable chairman of the joint union-management meetings, held twice a year.

Looking back, Tovey is pleased with his own duplicity: "I think it's quite a feather in Whitehall's cap that we kept the whole thing secret."

AMONG THE handful who shared the secret was Vice-Admiral Bobby Inman, then director of the National Security Agency (NSA), the American equivalent to GCHQ. When in 1981 Tovey told him that he had finalised his plans to get the unions banned, and committed them to paper, Inman replied: "That's marvellous."

All last week the government was firmly insisting that there had been no American pressure for the move against the unions, and that is strictly true. In Tovey's words: "The relationship is more subtle."

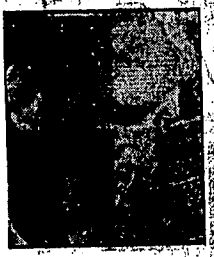
There is no doubt at all however, that the *attitude* of the Americans towards the "anomaly" of union presence inside somewhere as sensitive as GCHQ had a crucial influence on both Tovey, and on the politicians who were eventually persuaded to grasp the nettle he handed them.

As Tovey puts it: "They had always been puzzled by the presence of unions. They have a cast-iron organisation at the NSA. If anyone goes on strike there they get the sack. We used to have to tell them: 'We've had to drop this because of industrial unrest; could you pick it up for us?' The Americans found this bizarre."

And, in time, Tovey says, he began to observe "some reluctance to enter into the kind of work-sharing arrangement which we had enjoyed with the Americans. We read this as a message. We asked ourselves: 'Can it be that they are questioning our reliability?' "

Meanwhile, separate messages were reaching London from the Central Intelligence Agency. We have learned from Washington that, beginning in 1980, "representations" were made by the CIA to "the highest levels of MI6 (British intelligence) – and higher", presumably to the government's Joint Intelligence Committee, a depart-

ment of the cabinet office which coordinates all British intelligence activity). The message: the loss of any intelligence because of industrial disputes was "preposterous". According to our source: "We stopped short of saying how to deal with the problem. But point out the problem we most certainly did."



Prime: public trauma

These signals caused grave concern in Whitehall – as had the unions' obviously increasing taste for industrial action in Cheltenham. The one-day strike in February 1979 was followed by a dispute involving, in Tovey's words, staff who "lugged computer reels around and the like" which, he says, brought the long-term analysis of intercepted signals to a halt. Then, a dispute involving radio-maintenance men. Finally, in December 1979, after the Russians invaded Afghanistan, a work-to-rule by radio officers limited the degree to which Cheltenham could eavesdrop on Soviet tank and troop movements. Tovey found himself having to apologise to his "customers" for GCHQ's poor performance.

But, when Tovey was asked by the Joint Intelligence Committee for an assessment of the damage these disputes had caused he could not answer. "I said, 'Look, it's no use asking for precise damage because I don't know what hasn't been processed. We'll never know, period.'"

The six civil service unions with members inside GCHQ were blissfully unaware of the alarm they were causing. That was partly because of Tovey's continuing affability, partly because the disputes were, in their view, merely "niggling", and partly because the members themselves were adamant they would do nothing to jeopardise GCHQ's work. When, for example, on May 11, 1980, the TUC called for a nationwide Day of Action, only seven of GCHQ's 7,000 employees would agree to walk out.

To some extent, the national officials of the unions can be excused for not appreciating the effect and consequences of the disputes in 1979 and 1980. The were only allowed into Cheltenham with a security escort; and then invariably confined to canteens or libraries. Internal staff documents of the kind they would routinely get from other government departments were always classified; if the officials got them at all, reference to anything even mildly sensitive would be razored out.

But, in Tovey's view, any such excuse evaporated in 1981. In the spring of that year, he says, the unions made it "brutally clear" that they now regarded GCHQ as a *preferable* target – "a damn good place to hit."

"Hitting GCHQ doesn't hit the public, but it does bother and embarrass HMG," he said. "Once the unions twigged that, by godfathers, we didn't have a viable option."

TOVEY GOT the first hint of this brutal truth on March 8, 1981. The civil service unions had just begun their first-ever, full-scale national dispute over the government's decision to abandon the civil service pay agreement, and to limit pay rises to 7 per cent. From the outset the unions pledged they would disrupt Britain's secret surveillance and communications networks, and they promised "national and international repercussions" as a result. It was not a hollow threat.

The unions called a one-day strike at Cheltenham, and then, for the next four weeks, mounted "selective disruptive action" at some of GCHQ's British outposts. According to Tovey, it became imperative that one of those actions be called off "for the most vital security reasons", and he therefore sent one of his senior staff to plead with a trade union official to spare the outstation concerned.

For security reasons, the union official could not be put completely in the picture. But, says Tovey, the explanation he was given "sailed pretty close to the wind". The official's blunt response was: "You are telling me where I'm hurting Mrs Thatcher."

Tovey will not say which outstation was involved, or which international crisis made its operation "vital", but during this period there was an attempt to assassinate President Reagan in Washington, Solidarity called a national strike in Poland and, with the Russians making menacing noises, the Polish communist central committee went into emergency session.

Whatever the crisis, the incident finally convinced Tovey to "put pen to paper" and make a written recommendation to the Joint Intelligence Committee that unions should be banned from GCHQ. He justified it by saying that union action had put "unfair stress on the Americans" and caused a degree of "schizophrenia" for the staff: on the one hand they were desperately patriotic and proud to be part of GCHQ; on the other they were being called on to cause disruption with increasing frequency.

That recommendation was passed on to the prime minister and Lord Carrington, then foreign secretary. It was not taken up solely because they believed such a move would inevitably put the spotlight on GCHQ, and expose it to the public as a major centre of espionage.

The subsequent arrest and trial of Geoffrey Prime, the GCHQ spy, obviously made that argument redundant. Once the security commission had investigated and reported on the Prime affair, in May 1983, the only wonder is why the government did not take up Tovey's proposal immediately.

THE UNIONS have used the interim to upset the government further by opposing the

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security commission's main recommendation that, in the light of Prime, polygraph or "lie detector" tests should be introduced, on a trial basis, as part of the security vetting.

Neither union officials nor members seem to have had any inkling that the government had had enough. The delivery on the desks at Cheltenham of general notice GN 100/84, contained in buff-brown envelopes, stunned staff. "Some people went white, some people started to giggle", said a Cheltenham branch secretary. "You could say they were in a mild state of clinical shock."

The key to the unions' strategy in the debate which this curt ultimatum triggered, has been the realisation by their leaders that they cannot really deny the possible damage caused by industrial action. So the unions have conceded that, despite every effort not to endanger national security, there may have been risks. Asked point-blank last week by the employment select committee whether the unions had disrupted security, the chairman of the council of civil service unions, Bill McCall, replied; "I would say that the straight answer to that is, yes we have."

Instead they argue that had they been asked, they would have negotiated some form of no-strike agreement at GCHQ, and they point to precedents – such as those at Coulport and Faslane, where Polaris submarines are rearmed with nuclear warheads. There, a £880-per-year allowance negotiated in July 1982 is payable only on condition that the workforce "carry out normal duties under their conditions of service". Although the deal is a long way from the cast-iron no-strike agreement the government would demand at GCHQ as a minimum condition if it did not compromise, it shows, say union officials, what can be achieved with discussion.

*Geoffrey Howe: the foreign secretary who grasped the nettle*

The union hope is to appeal to the British sense of fair play. "We are pitching our campaign at the right level," says John Sheldon, general secretary of the Civil Service union. The basic theme – that people should have a right to belong to a trade union – has been vigorously supported not just by the TUC but by an unexpected broad coalition of support embracing MPs of all parties, even right-wing Tories such as John Gorst. He said last week that he was "baffled and bemused" by the ban.

Union officials argue that banning trade unions will not ensure greater committment from staff. They also argue that it will not technically eliminate the threat of strikes at GCHQ; disruption could be organised by the staff association which the government wants to see in the unions' place.

While these arguments swirl around them, the staff at Cheltenham and the outstations find themselves, once again, the unwilling centre of press attention. They are, as one union official from London said, "terribly secretive and loyal to the country. They are not theatrical people; prone to making public displays of conscience."

But that has happened. At one union meeting last week the depth of feeling was still palpable. Members stood up and made angry speeches and some even gave their names to the press – a decision that caused many great anguish.

Of those who have spoken out, some are defiant, saying they will not give in. "I will not work for any organisation that denies me basic human rights," said Dick Pinhey, an engineer at Cheltenham. But others are less certain, like Dave Blogg, a 39-year-old design engineer who said: "As a body we have strength, but I don't know. With a wife and family, who can afford principles?"

Nevertheless, the staff are, for the moment, putting up more resistance than anyone expected – most of all the government. One prominent minister told The Sunday Times yesterday that GCHQ's management had given assurances that "only about 20 people" would object to the union ban; the rest would welcome it. "It may be they didn't plan their campaign with the care that they might have", said the minister.

There are, however, strong doubts as to whether resistance among the staff will last. Last week few were willing to say they would risk being transferred to whatever job the civil service may decide is "suitable" for those who refuse to sign.

For his part, Sir Brian Tovey is dismayed at the way that his plan was brutally presented to the staff, whom he believes are paragons of loyalty. But he holds firm to his belief that the plan was right: "They have had a lot of trauma at GCHQ. First Prime, now this. But if one believes, as I do, that the work is vital then we have to do this.

"At the moment it's like having an army whose soldiers say they don't feel like fighting one day."